

Masthead Logo

---

Archives Alive

---

4-1-2014

# Peace, Love, and Nuclear Explosions

Allison Bump  
*University of Iowa*

---

Analysis copyright © 2014 Allison Bump

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](http://iowa-research-online.org). For more information please contact: [lib-ir@uiowa.edu](mailto:lib-ir@uiowa.edu).

# Peace, Love, and Nuclear Explosions

By: Allison Bump

Lyndon Johnson's "Daisy" advertisement during the 1964 presidential election is considered a [turning point in the history of political advertising](#). It is what many claim to be one of the earliest attack ads, using the opponent's own words to portray himself in a negative light. By using rhetorical techniques and reinventing the standard for political advertisements, "Daisy" was successful in some of the ways it intended. An emotional response was triggered by many of the techniques used in the ad including: the absence of music, the feelings of fear and empathy evoked, and the use of "oversimplification". These were successful in changing viewers' feelings towards opponent Barry Goldwater and his nuclear views, but did little to turnover the votes of Goldwater's supporters to votes for Johnson.



Two of the most powerful tools in media advertising are the emotions of fear and empathy, both of which are featured in this ad. While many ads in current times try incredibly hard to fit as much information about the product or candidate in their commercial's time limit,

"Daisy" took a different approach. I was caught off-guard at first because it was unlike any political advertisement I've ever seen. It used a cute, innocent girl at the beginning with no sign of a political agenda in site--up until the end it could be mistaken as a movie trailer. I don't know about you, but when a political ad is featured,

I oftentimes block the message from entering my mind. With "Daisy", there was no way of knowing what was to come. By the time the political message was presented, viewers were sucked in and had no choice but to think of the disaster that would ensue if Johnson's opponent were elected.

The way "Daisy" was presented to its viewers heightened the emotional tug the audience felt. While the only demographic shown in the commercial was a young girl (the actress was three years old), as a political ad, it was clearly targeting a much older population. Whether the viewers were in the age bracket of parent, grandparent, older sibling, or school teacher, nearly everyone could sympathize with the ad's message. What is especially interesting about this ad is the time at which it was shown. The "Daisy" spot was aired on NBC [during a showing of the movie "David and Bathsheba"](#). Because this film was based on a biblical story, it was considered a family film that every member of the house could enjoy ensuring that the viewership of the ad would be extremely high. "Daisy" was featured at 9:50 p.m. Eastern time and played with the idea that many of the children who fit the "daisy girl" demographic would already be sleeping, leaving the parents and older siblings watching the movie without their presence. Without the child in the room as they are watching the advertisement, the family is manipulated into visualizing their child in the role. Thanks to the strategic time placement and the nature of "Daisy", the target of emotions was especially successful.

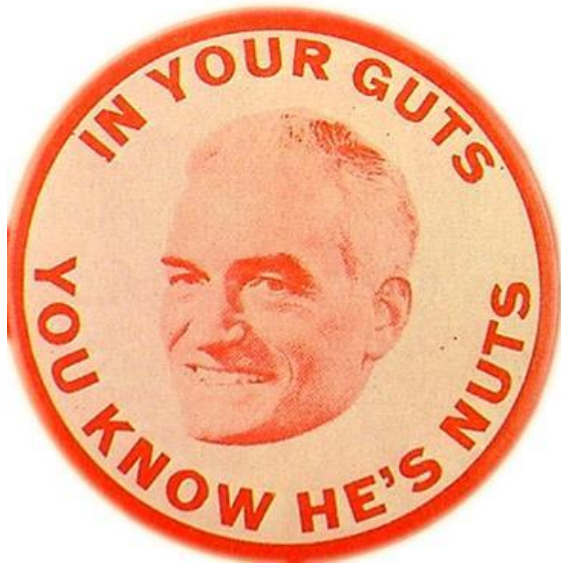
Music is commonly used to tell the viewer what emotion to feel, but this is not the case in "Daisy". If music is present, a mood is

immediately set and the audience can ultimately know how to respond to the message. Surprisingly, in Johnson's "Daisy", there is no music and yet it works in favor of what the creators of the ad are trying to accomplish. Just like in real life, the little girl plucking daisy petals in a meadow does not have music, but rather birds chirp along with other sounds of



nature. In that moment, the viewer is with that little girl in the meadow--she could be the viewer's daughter, little sister, or granddaughter on a family outing. Finally, the little girl looks up and the image freezes. A cold, sterile voice starts a countdown from ten as the camera zooms into her eye, where the image of explosions and mushroom clouds appears. Throughout the entire one minute clip, there is no music. The ad uses its striking images of peace to draw the audience in. Once the audience feels connected, they are shocked by the sudden change to the visuals of war and destruction. By removing music from the commercial, there is a sense of realism the audience can't help but feel.

One rhetorical tool this ad capitalized on is "Oversimplification", giving the choice between peace and death. As stated by Robert J. Gula in his book *Nonsense* (p.23-24), "He takes a complex issue and reduces it to extremes, often presenting that issue as an *either...or*." As shown by this quote taken from the ad, Johnson implies that there is a definite "right" and "wrong" choice.



Johnson implies that his choice is the right choice. Because Johnson made the two choices such extremes, the viewer is ultimately faced with either voting for him and giving "all of God's children" life, or voting for Goldwater and choosing "darkness" and death. Although there was no mention of Goldwater in the ad and he had no true evidence that Goldwater's presidency would lead

to nuclear war, the fear appeal was enough to [concern voters that he would engage in nuclear warfare](#).

Today, attack ads play a vital role in political advertising, but this was not always the case. Catchy jingles and tunes encouraged voters to support their candidate rather than tear down the competition. As one of the first attack ads, "Daisy" capitalized on the fear the public already felt. Johnson and his campaign reined in the public's terror and named the instigator: Barry Goldwater. The choice was presented to the public as either Johnson as President or death. Because of these revolutionary ways of advertising, the public's perception of Goldwater changed. This was not enough to alter the votes already in his favor, but the uncertainty of his radical views on nuclear warfare gave citizens doubt of his credibility. In its entirety, this ad was very successful in changing beliefs. By building up the fear of a world full of war, at the end of the commercial people desired a solution, and they were left with this solemn call to action: *The stakes are too high for you to stay home.*

## References:

Gula, Robert J. *Red Herrings, Straw Men and Sacred Cows: How We Abuse Logic in Our Everyday Language*. Mount Jackson, VA: Axios Press, 2007. 23-24. Print.

MilitusAeternaum, , dir. *1964 Daisy Ad*. YouTube, 2013. Film. 5 Feb 2014. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-DhkY6d9uqQ>>.